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RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 7504
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 8082
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 000109

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SUBJECT: BJP VETERAN ATTACKS CENTER, INFIGHTING CONTINUES

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Former Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat's criticism of his own Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) prime ministerial hopeful L.K. Advani garnered widespread media attention last week. While the 86-year-old party stalwart's cranky outburst is unlikely to cause any lasting damage to the party, it does remind the electorate that the BJP suffers from the same factionalism and petty internal rivalries that rack Indian political parties and helps puncture the myth of a united, disciplined, center-driven party. It also distracts the party from refining its strategy and honing its message in preparation for the national elections in April-May of this year. END SUMMARY.

Shekhawat Makes a Splash

12. (U) Former Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat announced that he would contest Lok Sabha elections from Rajasthan during a January 7 media event, signaling the 86-year-old BJP veteran's return to national politics. Shekhawat, who entered politics in 1951, was a three-time Chief Minister from Rajasthan and served as Vice President from 2002 to 2004, said that he could lead the state BJP in a better direction after five years of "corruption and infighting" under former Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje. According to contacts, Shekhawat nurses grudges against Raje, who tended to ignore and sideline him when she led the state government until her party's disappointing assembly election loss last December. He particularly resented the central BJP leadership's decision to appoint Raje as leader of state opposition despite her responsibility for the party's defeat and has "seized the opportunity" to cause maximum damage to the BJP. The BJP leadership has little option but to weather the controversy and to appear unfazed by Shekhawat's attacks. BJP President Rajnath Singh on January 10 praised Shekhawat as a "respected senior" and denied reports of party infighting.

Shekhawat vs. Advani

13. (U) Speaking one day after throwing his hat into the ring for Lok Sabha elections, Shekhawat openly criticized BJP prime ministerial candidate L.K. Advani during a press conference. Shekhawat, who was known to have nurtured

relationships that cut across party lines, questioned Advani's ability to mobilize widespread support from National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners.

¶4. (U) Shekhawat's attack on the BJP leadership was seen by many as a continuation of the contentious "leadership debate" within the BJP and the Sangh Parivar, in which RSS leaders had raised doubts about Advani's ability to mount sustained, ideologically-driven attacks on the UPA. This issue appeared settled in 2007, with the RSS and BJP delivering various public statements in support of Advani as the presumptive BJP prime ministerial candidate. Few believe that Shekhawat, for all his cross-party appeal and years of political service, can seriously challenge Advani for the BJP's PM candidate slot. However, Shekhawat's heated attacks, and the tremors that it has triggered within party ranks, underline the faultlines between the BJP and some quarters of its RSS base.

Waiting out the Storm

¶5. (SBU) Placed in an unenviable situation by a respected if somewhat cranky party veteran, the BJP's interim strategy has been to wait out the news cycle and to stay clear of provocative public statements. Eager to project a united front ahead of national elections, political observers do not expect any organizational changes at the center or in the state of Rajasthan. The BJP and NDA allies, including the RSS, have given Advani the stamp of approval for the Prime Minister position and are unlikely to revisit that issue.

NEW DELHI 00000109 002 OF 002

Analysts believe that Shekhawat's tantrums will have minimal political fallout in the national elections. Many within the party feel that the affect of Shekhawat's rebellion will only impact Rajasthan politics, and that too in a limited manner. Most would like to see the issues resolved behind closed doors by party leaders. With this in mind, Party President Rajnath Singh met with Shekhawat on January 9, which according to party sources helped to "ease the atmosphere".

Comment: Eyes on the Prize, Elections 2009

¶6. (SBU) Shekhawat's announcement comes as a irritating distraction for the BJP at a time when the central leadership had been hoping to concentrate on refining the message and finalizing party elections strategy ahead of fast-approaching Lok Sabha elections. The BJP's twin elections planks of fighting terror and limiting price rise are losing steam. The Congress Party appears to have effectively managed to deflect post-Mumbai public anger by keeping up the diplomatic pressure on Pakistan and swiftly taking steps to strengthen the country's terrorism-related legislation. Inflation has steadily decreased during the last several months and is no longer a priority voter concern. Despite limited political fallout, Shekhawat's attacks reflect growing factionalism within the BJP. They remind the electorate that the BJP suffers from the same squabbling that afflicts other Indian political parties and that the BJP is not the united, disciplined, center-driven machine that it would like to project itself as. While Shekhawat may have cited loftier reasons for his disenchantment with the party that he served for over half a century, word is that his petty tirade was triggered by rumors that his son was going to be denied a slot on the BJP's Lok Sabha candidate list. END COMMENT.

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